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ABSTRACT

Because youths often lack the knowledge and skills to constructively address the problems and challenges they encounter in their lives, they often make choices that result in negative outcomes. The various individual, small group, organizational, and systematic youth advocacy services that are described in this paper provide counselors with new ways of thinking about the role they can play in promoting the psychological health and personal well-being of larger numbers of youths in the future. The advocacy services that are outlined in this paper represents only a few of the many ways in which counselors can help foster healthy adolescent development by moving beyond the sort of individual crisis counseling services many practitioners overutilize in their work. (Contains 3 references.) (MKA)

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Chapter Seven

Youth advocacy

Michael D'Andrea and Judy Daniels

According to the American Heritage Desk Dictionary (1981) the term "advocate" is defined in the following way: "A person who argues for a cause; a supporter or defender" (p. 16). Using this definition as a guide, it is logical to think of a "youth advocate" as a person who argues for, supports and defends the rights of youths. It is interesting to note that, while many counselors provide advocacy services to promote the psychological health and personal well-being of youngsters and adolescents, they do not always view themselves as "youth advocates." This is due, in part, to the fact that few publications have directed attention to the counselor's role as a youth advocate in the professional counseling literature. Because little has been written about advocacy services, many counselors are not aware of the ways in which they are currently acting as advocates or the things they could do to advocate for the rights of their young clients in the future.

What do We Mean by Advocacy?

Recognizing the need to promote a clearer understanding of what the term "advocacy" means and how it can be used in counseling practice, we have taken time in this article to examine this important though often underutilized intervention strategy. In thinking about ways in which they can use advocacy services in their work, we have noted that counselors should begin advocacy efforts by "identifying groups of people who might benefit from increasing their own strength" (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 1998, p. 25). This includes those groups of persons whose personal needs and concerns are not supported or respected by individuals who have the power to establish rules, policies, and/or laws that affect their lives.

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There are literally millions of people in our society who are not given the opportunity to participate fully in establishing rules, policies, and/or laws that affect their lives. These groups of people have been referred to as "socially devalued populations" (Lewis et al., 1998). Socially devalued populations include but are not limited to poor people, gay and lesbian persons, elderly individuals, persons who are physically challenged, culturally and racially diverse individuals, and youths, to name a few. These individuals are often subjected to various forms of prejudice, discrimination, and negative stereotyping that result in their being misunderstood, separated from, and stigmatized by the mainstream community. Because individuals in these socially devalued groups typically have limited power and little say about things that happen in their families, schools, workplaces, and/or communities, they frequently come to believe that they are not valued by others. When a person's sense of self-worth and personal power is eroded, individuals commonly exhibit various types of antisocial behaviors and/or mental health problems.

Because so many people experience a sense of powerlessness in their lives, counselors should go beyond the use of traditional counseling services (e.g., the use of individual, intrapsychic-focused therapeutic approaches). We have to implement advocacy services that are intentionally aimed at helping people acquire a greater sense of self-worth and collective empowerment in their lives. In discussing the importance of using advocacy services in counseling practice, McWhirter (1994) notes that such services should be intentionally designed to: (a) increase the healthy psychological functioning of individuals in socially devalued populations and (b) promote the collective empowerment of those socially devalued populations of which their clients are a part.

Although counselors are professionally and ethically responsible for advocating for the rights and mental health of all socially devalued persons, they really need to pay special attention to the importance of using advocacy services when working with young people. It is particularly important to advocate for the rights and psychological well-being of young people because their sense of self-worth and personal power is often undermined by disempowering policies, practices, and institutions in society. Because this article is specifically written for counseling practitioners who work with youths, we provide a concrete example of the type of advocacy that fostered the empowerment of adolescents. The Nashville Youth Network (NYN) was intentionally designed to assist youths in developing a broad range of skills

that they could use to address situations that might otherwise have been disempowering.

The Nashville Youth Network (NYN): An Example of Youth Advocacy

NYN is an alternative youth service project that was designed to promote adolescent development by encouraging teenagers to constructively address concerns and problems they were encountering in their lives. Besides directing their attention to many of the problems adults commonly associate with the teenage years (e.g., drug and alcohol misuse/abuse, school dropouts, teen pregnancies, etc.), the young people who participated in this program also expressed interest in dealing with other types of problems that frequently receive much less attention by youth service providers. This included the lack of respect they felt from many adults, the lack of "real" input they had regarding unfair school policies and practices, and the failure of government officials and other community policy-makers to solicit feedback from adolescents when developing of laws and policies that had a direct impact on the lives of young people.

Individual Youth Advocacy Services

The Nashville Youth Network (NYN) scheduled their weekly meetings at one of the local high schools. Between 15 to 50 adolescents regularly attended these meetings. The teenagers who participated in this organization identified an adult adviser (one of the authors of this article) who they both trusted and viewed as being potentially helpful when discussing possible ways of addressing the various problems and concerns that were raised during the NYN meetings. As a result, the adult adviser played an important role in this organization by: (1) providing information about youth service agencies and other types of resources that were available in the community, (2) supporting the youths as they discussed various problems and concerns they experienced in their lives, and (3) encouraging them as they developed strategies to effectively deal with these problems and concerns.

Besides benefiting from her role as a "program consultant," numerous teenagers in NYN also talked to the adult adviser about personal concerns and/or problems they were encountering in their own lives. However, rather than establishing a formal counseling relationship with these individuals, the adviser maintained her

role as consultant and:

(a) carefully listened to the various issues/problems that the teenagers described to her (which typically involved issues related to alcohol/drug use, sexuality, and family problems);
(b) communicated a genuine sense of concern about the personal problems the youths were experiencing;
(c) collected information about the specific concerns that the teenagers expressed; and
(d) referred the teenagers to appropriate youth service providers who were trained in the specific area in which the teenagers were experiencing problems.

Many of the youths who spoke to the adult adviser about their personal concerns were initially resistant to the notion of voluntarily seeking counseling services for their problems. However, by explaining the benefits that can be derived from counseling and emphasizing issues of confidentiality which counselors are bound, many of the teenagers in NYN voluntarily sought professional counseling services to help them deal with serious problems they were experiencing. By taking the time to respectfully advocate for the use of these sort of counseling services, the adult adviser was able to assist individual youths (who were initially very resistant to the idea) to voluntarily participate in programs and services that were designed to foster their psychological health and sense of personal well-being.

Small Group Youth Advocacy Interventions

Many of the teenagers who participated in NYN expressed concern about the drug and alcohol-related problems that some of their friends were experiencing. These youths were particularly frustrated that the public schools were not doing enough to educate youngsters about the problems that are commonly associated with alcohol and drug abuse. As a result of discussing this issue during NYN meetings, the adolescents agreed that more time, energy and resources should be directed towards providing preventive alcohol and drug education services to younger children as a way of dealing with the problem of adolescent substance abuse.

Consequently, the youths asked the adult adviser for assistance in developing strategies and skills they needed to implement a preventive intervention in the elementary schools in the area. The adult advisor and the adolescents in NYN proceeded to work together to develop a "puppet show" that focused on the

harmful effects that drinking and drugs can have on different parts of the body. After the puppet show was organized, the adult adviser helped the teenagers develop "marketing strategies" which were designed to let elementary school principals and counselors know about this innovative preventive education service. As a result of their efforts, the alcohol and drug prevention puppet show became a very popular youth advocacy project in the community. By presenting the puppet show to hundreds of elementary school-aged students over the course of several years, the teenagers in NYN gained a greater sense of collective empowerment as they helped youngsters gain a better understanding of the importance of developing healthy lifestyles and avoid making life choices that would negatively impact their lives in the future.

Organizational Advocacy

Besides implementing these alcohol and drug prevention advocacy services in the elementary schools, the teenagers in NYN were also interested in promoting organizational changes in their own high schools. They hoped that such changes would lead school personnel to: (a) gain greater understanding of their needs and concerns and (b) encourage them to treat teenagers in more sensitive, respectful, and supportive ways. With these goals in mind, the NYN members worked with the adult adviser to plan strategies for promoting constructive organizational changes in their schools.

By helping the youths in NYN to: (1) develop a plan which was aimed at promoting positive changes at their schools, (2) acquire the types of consultation skills they would need to effectively implement their organizational development strategies, and (3) providing constant support and encouragement for their efforts, the adult adviser was able to play an important "behind the scenes role" in advocating for the rights and well-being of these youths. These efforts resulted in several NYN representatives meeting with school administrators and members of the local school board to: (a) discuss ways in which out-dated school policies could be altered to more effectively address the needs and concerns of contemporary youths, (b) provide examples of new policies that reflect greater understanding and respect for the psychological needs of youths, and (c) advocate for youth representation on the local school board.

Systemic Youth Advocacy Services

Because they were interested in extending their advocacy efforts beyond the sort of organizational change strategies that were discussed above, the adolescents in NYN began to discuss ways in which they might have an even more profound and lasting impact on the lives of adolescents in the community. When the adult adviser was asked for advice in this area, she helped the teenagers gain a better understanding of the importance of promoting systemic changes in the institutions that create policies and allocate resources that effect schools and other organizations in their community. By helping these teenagers acquire a basic understanding of systems theory, the adult adviser fostered an increased sense of personal empowerment as the adolescents in NYN began talking about ways in which they could work to create longer lasting systemic changes in their community.

This sense of increased collective empowerment led to discussions about ways in which they could work with local and state elected officials to influence future legislative actions that were related to youth issues. By advocating for the development and implementation of systemic change strategies, the adult adviser offered her support, encouragement, and technical assistance by:

(1) consulting with the teenagers about ways in which they could gain the support of elected officials regarding the importance of drafting legislation that reflected greater sensitivity, understanding, and respect for the needs of youths in the state;

(2) helping representatives from NYN set up a series of meetings with elected officials that focused on a broad range of youth-related issues; and

(3) working with the teenagers in NYN as they convened a state-wide "Youth Constitutional Convention." This Youth Constitutional Convention was designed to bring teenagers together from across the state to discuss ways in which the state constitution could be amended so that the rights of children and youth would be better guaranteed in their schools and communities.

Conclusion

Because youths often lack the knowledge and skills to constructively address the problems and challenges they encounter

in their lives, they often make choices that result in negative outcomes. The various individual, small group, organizational, and systemic youth advocacy services that are described in this article provide counselors with new ways of thinking about the role they can play in promoting the psychological health and personal well-being of larger numbers of youths in the future. The advocacy services that were outlined above represent only a few of the many ways in which counselors can help foster healthy adolescent development by moving beyond the sort of individual crisis counseling services that many practitioners overutilize in their work.

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